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Researchers, Lawmakers Criticize Inquiry Into Climate Calculations

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A congressional inquiry into global-warming calculations by three U.S. scientists is drawing sharp criticism from research leaders as well as a pair of senior lawmakers from both parties.

The probe, launched in June by Rep. Joe Barton (R., Texas), chairman of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee, seeks details surrounding possible errors in an estimate of global temperatures that appeared prominently in a 2001 United Nations report on global warming.

Now critics are taking aim at Rep. Barton, claiming the probe is an attempt to stifle scientific findings. In a letter fired off earlier this month, Rep. Henry Waxman (D., Calif.) said the inquiry could be interpreted as an effort to "bully and harass climate-change scientists."

The dispute is the latest skirmish over the scientific facts on global warming. Emissions of gases from burning fossil fuels are likely a major contributor to rising temperatures, according to most experts. The Bush administration has cited remaining scientific uncertainties in opposing mandatory caps on emissions.

In June, Rep. Barton's staff sent letters to Pennsylvania State University professor Michael E. Mann, researchers at two other institutions, the National Science Foundation and the United Nations demanding scientific data supporting a well-known estimate of temperatures over the past 1,000 years.

The graphic, known as the "hockey stick" because it shows a sharp increase in temperatures in the 20th Century compared with earlier years, has come under fire from independent researchers who say it contains errors. Dr. Mann and other scientists say it is accurate. The controversy over the hockey-stick graphic was discussed in a page-one article in The Wall Street Journal on Feb. 14, an article Rep. Barton cited in his letter to Dr. Mann.

Rep. Barton's list of demands included details of all funding the researchers had received, as well as extensive archives and computer codes used in the research. In an interview, Rep. Barton said that the committee may call on outside experts "to see if the conclusions made from the report can be valid and replicated."

"This report is used as a lodestar and the authors ought to be able to back it up," Rep. Barton said.

The scientific community is still sorting out to what degree the "hockey stick" is correct. Its basic finding, that the 1990s were likely the warmest decade of the last millennium, is reproduced in other studies. But even minor errors found in the graph would bolster skeptics of global warming. The hockey stick was prominently featured in a 2001 report by the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, used to shape international policy on greenhouse-gas emissions. Rep. Barton has also asked the U.N. to explain if and how that report was vetted.

Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the IPCC, said in an interview that Rep. Barton's request was highly unusual, particularly as many U.S. government scientists and officials were involved in producing the report. Dr. Pachauri said last week he hadn't yet decided how to reply to the request.

Alan Leshner, head of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said Rep. Barton's demands could "chill the willingness of scientists to work on difficult problems."

On Friday, Dr. Mann provided a copy of an 11-page response that he said would be given to Rep. Barton's committee. In it, Dr. Mann reiterated scientific arguments he says back up his work, and indicated where his computer codes and other data could be located on the Internet.

One Republican committee chairman is also seeking an end to Rep. Barton's inquiry. On Friday, Sherwood Boehlert (R., N.Y.), head of the House Science Committee, sent a letter to Rep. Barton saying his committee lacked jurisdiction over climate science.

Since no charges of fraud or other illegal activity have been made in the case, Rep. Boehlert said the request for documents "raised the specter of politicians opening investigations against any scientist who reaches a conclusion that makes the political elite uncomfortable."

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